



Difficult Conversations

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Yosef's plan to reveal himself to the brothers who sold him to Egypt is elaborate and unfolds gradually and dramatically. This week's *parashah* begins right after Yosef frames his youngest brother Binyamin with a crime. Yosef has his special goblet planted in Binyamin's sack and has him arrested for the supposed theft. VaYigash opens with Yehudah's long and impassioned speech to Yosef on behalf of their youngest brother. Yehudah pleads with Yosef to free Binyamin and to imprison Yehudah instead, **וְעַתָּה יֵשֶׁב נָא עַבְדְּךָ תַּחַת הַנֶּעֱר עַבְדִּי לְאֹדֹנִי, וְהַנֶּעֱר יַעַל עִם אָחִיו, and now let your servant stay as a slave instead of the boy and the boy will go up with his brothers** (Bereishit 44:33).

However, before Yehudah makes this bold request, he narrates some of the story of the brothers' interaction with Yosef first. Why does Yehudah make this rhetorical choice? Why does he take the time to tell Yosef what he already knows, and why does the Torah choose to include the entirety of this lengthy and somewhat repetitive speech? Yehudah's strategic choices can provide us with a way to approach the difficult conversations in our own lives and guide us in navigating these challenging interactions well. The entirety of Yehudah's speech is as follows:

בראשית מד:יח-לד

וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי יְדִבֶּר נָא עַבְדְּךָ דְּבַר בְּאָזְנֵי אֲדֹנָי וְאֵל יְחִיר אֶפְרַיִם בְּעַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְמוֹךָ כָּפַרְתָּהּ: אֲדֹנָי שְׁאֵל אֶת עַבְדִּי לֵאמֹר הֲיֵשׁ לָכֶם אֵב אוֹ אֶחָ: וַנֹּאמֶר אֶל אֲדֹנָי יֵשׁ לָנוּ אֵב זָקֵן וְיֵלֵד זָקֵנִים קָטָן וְאָחִיו מֵת וַיִּזְתֶּר הוּא לְבָדוֹ לְאִמּוֹ וְאָבִיו אָהָבוֹ: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל עַבְדֶּיךָ הוֹרְדֵהוּ אֵלָי וְאֲשִׁימָה עֵינֵי עָלָיו: וַנֹּאמֶר אֶל אֲדֹנָי לֹא יוּכַל הַנֶּעֱר לַעֲזֹב אֶת אָבִיו וְעַזֵּב אֶת אָבִיו וּמָת: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל עַבְדֶּיךָ אִם לֹא יֵרֵד אָחִיכֶם הַקָּטָן אִתְּכֶם לֹא תִסְפְּוּ לְרְאוֹת פָּנָי: וַיְהִי כִי עָלִינוּ אֶל עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי וְנִגַּד לוֹ אֶת דְּבָרֵי אֲדֹנָי: וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִינוּ שְׁבוּ שִׁבְרוּ לָנוּ מַעַט אֶכֹּל: וַנֹּאמֶר לֹא נוּכַל לָרֶדֶת אִם יֵשׁ אָחִינוּ הַקָּטָן אִתָּנוּ: וַיִּרְדְּנוּ כִי לֹא נוּכַל לְרְאוֹת פָּנָי הָאִישׁ וְאָחִינוּ הַקָּטָן אִינֶנּוּ אִתָּנוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי אֵלֵינוּ אִתָּם יְדַעְתֶּם כִּי שְׁנַיִם יָלְדָה לִי אֲשֶׁתִּי: וַיֵּצֵא הָאֶחָד מֵאֵתִי וַאֲמַר אֶךָ טָרֵף טָרֵף וְלֹא רָאִיתִיו עַד הַנָּה: וְלִקְחָתָם גַּם אֶת זֶה מֵעַם פָּנִי וְקִרְהוּ אִסּוֹן וְהוֹרְדָתָם אֶת שִׁבְתִּי בְרָעָה שְׂאֵלָה: וְעַתָּה כְּבֹאִי אֶל עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי וְהַנֶּעֱר אִינֶנּוּ אִתָּנוּ וְנִפְשׁוּ קִשּׁוּרָה בְּנִפְשׁוֹ:



וְהָיָה כְּרֵאוֹתָיו כִּי אֵין הַנֶּעֱר וּמֵת וְהוֹרִידוּ עַבְדֶּיךָ אֶת שִׁיבַת עַבְדְּךָ אֲבִינוּ בְּיָגוֹן שְׂאֵלָה: כִּי עַבְדְּךָ עֶרֶב אֶת הַנֶּעֱר מֵעַם אָבִי לֵאמֹר אִם לֹא אָבִיאֲנוּ אֵלֶיךָ וְחִטָּאתִי לְאָבִי כָּל הַיָּמִים: וְעַתָּה יֵשֶׁב נָא עַבְדְּךָ תַּחַת הַנֶּעֱר עַבְדְּ לַאֲדֹנָי וְהַנֶּעֱר יַעַל עִם אָחִיו: כִּי אִךְ אֶעֱלֶה אֶל אָבִי וְהַנֶּעֱר אֵינָנו אִתִּי כֹּן אֶרְאֶה בָּרַע אֲשֶׁר יִמָּצֵא אֶת אָבִי:

Bereishit 44:18-34

Yehudah approached him and said, “If it please my master, let your servant speak in the ears of my master for one who is like you is like Pharaoh. My master asked his servant saying, ‘Do you have a father or brother?’ And we said to my master, ‘We have an old father and a youngest brother, son of his old age whose brother has died. And he alone remains of his mother and his father loves him.’ And you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down and I will place my eyes upon him.’ And we said to our master, ‘The boy can not leave his father for when he leaves his father will die.’ And you said to your servants, ‘You will not see my face again if your youngest brother does not come down with you.’ And it came to pass that we went up to our father your servant and we told him the words of my master. And our father said, ‘Return and provide some food for us.’ And we said, ‘We can’t go down, unless our youngest brother is with us in which case we will go down, since we may not see the face of the man without our youngest brother with us. And your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two children. One of them departed from me and I said, “He is surely torn apart!” and I have not seen him even up until now. And you would take this one from before me as well? An accident could befall him and I will die of misfortune.’¹ And now, when I come to my father your servant and the boy is not with me?! His soul is tied to his soul! When he sees that the boy is not there he will die and your servants will have caused our father your servant to have died of anguish.’² For your servant guaranteed the boy from my father saying, ‘If I don’t bring him to you I will have sinned to my father for all time.’ Now, let your servant remain as a slave to my master instead and the boy will go up with his brothers. For how can I go up to my father and the boy is not with me?! Lest I witness the misfortune that will find my father.”

There are a number of lessons that we can glean from Yehudah’s speech. Yehudah’s choices of what to say and how to say it provide a template for how to broach difficult conversations and emerge from them with both parties feeling respected and heard.

1. Avoid blame

Yehudah efficiently tells the story of how his family came to Egypt and the way that Yosef treated them when they encountered him. Though he chooses to narrate much that Yosef already knows, and that we know as readers, in point of fact, Yehudah is very selective in his presentation. He is careful to lay down the facts in a way that is not completely exhaustive,

¹ Lit. “you will bring my old age, in evil, to the underworld.”

² Lit. “brought the old age of your servant, our father, in anguish to the underworld.”



only including the parts of the story that are necessary for the point that he eventually wants to make. Yehudah does not include Yosef's accusation that the brothers were spies, he does not include the bizarre choice that Yosef makes to return the brothers' money to them, and he does not mention why Binyamin has been taken into custody.

Yehudah's narrative is focused entirely around how Ya'akov's sons were asked by Yosef to bring Binyamin to Egypt and why it was difficult for them as children of their father to acquiesce to this request. Had Yehudah included details that were not specifically germane to the point that he needed to make, Yosef could have felt that Yehudah was complaining, and unjustly stacking up the facts in a way that made Yosef seem arbitrary and demanding. By clearing away extraneous information Yehudah was able to get to his point more directly. He argues for why Binyamin should be released and he himself imprisoned instead, without providing Yosef with a reason to feel defensive and resistant. By minimizing the amount of time he spent addressing Yosef's behavior and maximizing his narration of the possible future impact of Yosef's choices, he avoids "beating a dead horse" and moves the narrative in a constructive vein. He doesn't dwell on all that Yosef did to him and his brothers. This speech isn't about his expressing himself and airing his grievances: this is about addressing the matter at hand and focusing on what is not too late to change.

Another way in which Yehudah keeps Yosef from becoming defensive is his use of respectful pronouns. Yehudah consistently refers to himself and Yosef, as well as to his father and Binyamin, in the anonymous third person.³ He refers to himself as "your servant," his father as "your servant, my father," and to Yosef as "my master." Using these terms is not only a sign of respect and even obsequiousness; it also enables him to present the story to Yosef from a more neutral vantage point. By using pronouns, Yehudah can present the story more impersonally and Yosef can hear it more as a story or even as an argument, and not necessarily as an attack. It makes it possible for Yosef to hear this tale of woe as if it were a parable, a *mashal* about a master, his servant,⁴ and that servant's young brother and elderly, vulnerable father.

This is a technique that Yehudah may have learned from his own life experience. When his daughter-in-law Tamar needed Yehudah to acknowledge that her unborn child was his, she

³ According to Rav Yehudah, in the name of Rav, on Talmud Bavli Sotah 13a, Yosef was criticized and slightly punished for allowing his brothers to refer to their father as "your servant," allowing his father to be placed in a position of honoring him, when he should have been honoring his father.

⁴ It might also accustom Yosef to hearing Yehudah as the referent for "slave" or "servant" as opposed to Binyamin, and it might enable him to more easily imagine Yehudah accepting and excelling in a role of servitude even though he is now in more of a position of power and leadership.



referred to him anonymously.⁵ She did not say, “It was Yehudah.” Instead she said, “**לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֵלֶּה לוֹ אֲנֹכִי הָרָה וְתֹאמַר הֵכָּר נָא לְמִי הַחֲתָמָה וְהַפְּתִילִים וְהַמָּטָה הָאֵלֶּה**, **I was impregnated by the one to whom these objects belong! Identify who owns this seal, cords, and staff,**”⁶ the driver’s license and major credit cards of the Ancient Near East. Because Yehudah was able to approach the situation without feeling attacked, it opened up the possibility for him to admit that he was wrong. When we know that the story is about us, and the accusation is levelled at us, then we become defensive. Hearing the story in a neutral tone, with characters who are not us, enables us to evaluate the situation more objectively.

We should learn from Yehudah’s speech to enter the conversation through the lens of facts and not through the lens of complaints or condemnation. We should enter the conversation conveying as little judgment as possible, to open up a door for the person who we are speaking to. We want to encourage receptivity and empathy, both of which require some distance in the presentation on the part of both parties. And we should focus on the future, “What can we do to fix this?” rather than on the past, “Confront how you have harmed me!” If we want to be able to move forward towards a good outcome, we need to make it clear that we are willing and able to move on from past grievances.

2. Get emotional

Once Yehudah can be sure that Yosef is listening, he allows Yosef to peer into his father’s heart. Yehudah does not maintain that the reason why Yosef should heed his request is purely rational or moral, instead he appeals to Yosef’s emotions. He tries to garner Yosef’s sympathy because he wants Yosef to be able to act out of sympathy, which will allow Yosef to maintain the position that his own behavior is justified and nevertheless choose to change that behavior. Yehudah does not pretend that this is “no big deal” and that if Yosef denies his request that everything will be ok. He allows Yosef to step into the emotional state of the people he had been talking to and manipulating. He allows Yosef to see what his actions look like from the other side, to feel their impact. He uses language that reflects the true agony that Ya’akov is experiencing and the depth of his own fear and dread.

It can be difficult to betray vulnerability, particularly in a situation where we already feel or already are in fact powerless or defenseless. But Yehudah teaches us to be emotionally transparent, that it’s ok to ask someone to be kind to us, to take care of us. Yehudah is taking a risk in sharing his feelings with such a powerful figure and one who has behaved so

⁵ This is also the way that the prophet Natan was able to allow King David to understand his own sin in taking another man’s wife and sending that man out to die in battle. See II Shmuel 12.

⁶ Bereishit 38:25.



arbitrarily and cruelly to him. But “words that emerge from the heart enter the heart”⁷ and Yosef’s heart breaks when he hears Yehudah speak in this way. Yosef’s stern veneer cracks and he can no longer hold back his tears ... וַיִּתֵּן אֶת קִלּוֹ בְּבִכּוֹי... **And Yosef was unable to hold back... and he wept aloud...**⁸

3. Speak confidently

When Yehudah addresses Yosef, though his tone might be a bit pleading, what he actually says demonstrates an underlying assumption and conviction that Yosef will be interested in doing the right thing. He never says anything to the effect of, “I know that this is a big request” or “I understand why you wouldn’t want to do this” or “I’m not deserving of this treatment.” He lays out his argument with patience and with confidence. He doesn’t betray any insecurity as far as the validity of his request or, even more importantly, Yosef’s willingness to comply. He doesn’t suggest that accommodating this need would be exceptionally kind of Yosef, nor that denying it would be especially cruel. He speaks with hope and thereby invites Yosef to say yes.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Yehudah’s speech⁹ is how much factual information he repeats to Yosef which Yosef presumably already knows. However, though the information isn’t new and Yosef may be aware of what has happened, its impact, emotional or otherwise, is not necessarily known to Yosef. When Yehudah takes pains to reiterate the facts, he sets the stage to reframe them. He allows Yosef to hear the facts in Yehudah’s voice, to see the expression on his face, and to understand what the reality means to Yehudah and how it affects him. Yehudah does not allow the facts to speak for themselves, he chooses to narrate them in his own voice and to tie them to his own experience and the experience of those he cares for.

4. Say it again

The most important lesson to absorb from Yehudah is that we need to be willing to repeat ourselves. Sometimes it takes a second or a third time for the impact and meaning of what we are trying to communicate to sink in to the heart and mind of the person we are in relationship with. It takes a tremendous amount of patience to repeat ourselves until we are fully heard and what we are trying to communicate is fully appreciated. It can feel frustrating to have to open up the same conversation more than once. When we aren’t getting through,

⁷ This is a common idiom in Rabbinic texts and parallel idioms are found in other cultures. This particular phrasing is found in R. Moshe Ibn Ezra’s (12th cent. Spain) guide to poetry, *Shirat Yisrael*.

⁸ Bereishit 45:1-2.

⁹ Or at least, the most commented upon.





we can feel ignored or neglected. However, it is human nature to need some practice and reinforcement. We all forget, we all occasionally fail to understand and respond. Often we need to hear the same thing more than once or twice before we can incorporate an insight into our behavior, before we can make a change.

Often when we find ourselves in conflict or in pain, we can feel exasperated at having to spell out something that is, to us, obvious. “You already should know this, and I shouldn’t have to tell you” or “We already spoke about this, and we shouldn’t have to be speaking about it again.” Yehudah knew that Yosef had the facts. Maybe he shouldn’t have had to restate them and reframe them, but because he chose to, his plea penetrated into the soul of his brother and led to a level of reconciliation and forgiveness that even he himself did not think was possible.

Wishing you a Shabbat that penetrates the heart.

